



“They Never Really Tried to Reach Out to Us”: Examining Identities and Confronting the Emotional Distance Between Urban Youth and Urban Schools

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Abstract

This paper looks at the perspectives of 22 young adults concerning their upbringings and life experiences, experiences in inner city and suburban schools, after leaving school, and later in a privately funded urban GED preparation facility in a large southern city. Specifically it addresses the conceptions students have about school and their perspectives concerning their former public school teachers and the staff at the GED preparation facility. Some of the participants in the study left or were removed from public schools due to issues with attendance, discipline, or a desire on the part of the respective school's administration to, in their estimation, lower their liability concerning not meeting state testing standards. Others left because of community or family factors outside of school. All but one of the participants was African American and most indicated poverty as part of their backgrounds. The first part of this paper looks at what the interview data reveal about the participants identities and experiences, specifically looking at culture, race, gender and socioeconomics. The second part examines how the participants conceive of education and the acquisition of knowledge, and looks at issues of student alienation, the disconnect between community culture and that of the schools attended, and the perceived lack of care and irrelevance concerning institutionalized schooling. In an effort to point this research toward problem solving the paper concludes with a brief discussion of how the findings might positively inform teacher education.

Keywords: urban education, urban poverty, equity, racial identity and education, culturally relevant instruction

Introduction

This paper looks at the perspectives of 22 young adults concerning their experience in schools, out of schools, and in an urban GED preparation facility (herein referred to as GEDPF), respectively. It also addresses the conceptions students have about school and school personnel, and how this led to either positive or negative perceptions about the former. As illustration, the quote in the title is from Dennis, one of the participants, and is reflective of many of the participants' perspectives concerning their former public school teachers. Some of the participants in the study

either left or were removed from public schools due to issues with attendance, discipline, or a desire on the part of the respective school's administration to, in their estimation, lower their liability concerning not meeting state testing standards. Others left because of community or family factors outside of school. After dropping out or being pushed out of school the participants attended a privately funded inner city adult education facility with a large GED preparation program. All of the participants lived within the metropolitan area of a large southern city, most within the city limits, with a few coming from a surrounding county or satellite cities. At the time of the interviews their ages ranged from 19 to 43; 6 were male and 16 female; 21 were African American, one African; their socioeconomic status could be best described as working poor.¹

What follows looks at the participants' reporting of their upbringings and life experiences. Specifically it looks at their beliefs and attitudes regarding both the schools and the adult educational facility they attended. It then poses questions on two fronts. The first part of this paper looks at what the interview data reveal about the participants identities and experiences, specifically looking at culture, race, gender and socioeconomics. The second part examines how they conceive of education and the acquisition of knowledge. It also looks at issues of student alienation, the disconnect between community culture and that of the schools attended, and the perceived lack of care and irrelevance concerning institutionalized schooling. In an effort to point this research toward problem solving the paper concludes with a brief discussion of how the findings might positively inform teacher education.

Background²

The research was conducted with the cooperation of a privately funded inner city adult education facility as an effort to present the voices of a number of their GED recipients. The participants for this study were identified by Stephen, the GEDPF's director, from among their successful graduates.³ Humans operate within a socially engendered set of expectations and beliefs concerning human existence and essence, and how the social and physical worlds function; the realities that many inner city young people face, of course, informed how the participants in this study spoke of their chances, choices, and values. Pursuant, the data will be presented as situated within extant economic, political, racial, cultural, and gendered circumstances.

The overall aim of this project is to document and recount the participants' life experiences, specific encounters with a large city school system, and time spent working with the aforementioned adult educational facility. The depth, context, and nuance of the aforementioned interview data will be examined in reference to their perceptions of their own experiences in education. This piece is specifically concerned with how these voices reflect, inform, and exist within the context of the how the participants view the nature and scope of their lives, their views on the acquisition of knowledge and its use, and their viewpoints on what has been, and hopefully will be, beneficial to their lives. Some attention will be paid to where these categories also intersect within the narratives.

1. Much of this interpretation was gleaned from what was reported in the interviews concerning vocation, vocation of parents, lack of access to healthcare and transportation, and issues with securing and retaining housing. This is consistent with Federal data concerning poverty, e.g., Charles Hokayem and Misty L. Heggeness, "Living in Near Poverty in the United States: 1966–2012," United States Census Bureau, 2014, <https://www.census.gov/prod/2014pubs/p60-248.pdf>.

2. There have been many studies to focus on the voices of inner city youth. One of the most recent, and the one that mostly closely mirrors the context of this study, is *Feel These Words: Writing in the Lives of Urban Youth* by Susan Weinstein (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2009). In it she used interviews, observations, and analysis of student writing to tell the stories of students who attended an alternative high school after leaving a traditional one.

3. He died of cancer shortly after the interviews were concluded. The GEDPF has since closed.

Philosophical Framework and Methodology

The study was philosophically informed by phenomenology and the research itself was narrative inquiry. The nature of each will be discussed in what follow, as well as the methods deployed concerning the organization of the data. Concerning the former, the spirit in which the research was conducted is best framed by Moustakas:

Empirical phenomenological research returns to experience in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions. These descriptions then provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis to portray the essences of the experience. First the original data is comprised of 'naïve' descriptions obtained through open-ended questions and dialogue. Then the researcher describes the structure of the experience based on reflection and interpretation of the research participant's story. The aim is to determine what the experience means for the people who have had the experience. From there general meanings are derived.⁴

If reference to this project, the researcher approached the interviews with only a general idea concerning documenting the participants' relationship to their school experience, their communities, and those within the GEDPF.

As previously stated the methodology of the study was narrative analysis which will be discussed in what follows. Outside of the mechanics of having a set of questions that was standard for all interviewees, the flow of the interviews was largely conversational and follow up question came from the context of the initial stories told.⁵ It represented what Chase describes as "a joint production of narrator and listener."⁶ In reference to this point the impetus of this study lies more with the spirit of narrative research that looks at the polysemic nature of narratives from diverse backgrounds. Although there were similarities across several of the narrative conversations the primary position of this form of research is to emphasize "the uniqueness of each human action and event rather than their common properties."⁷ It was though analysis in this spirit that the aforementioned general meanings were derived from each narrative as a reflection of individual experience.

These narratives at their more revelatory represent the direct visceral experiences of the participant as located within their cultural point of reference and beliefs about the nature of our world and their reality. As Casey (1995) put it

Every narrative is highly constructed text structured around a cultural framework of meaning and shaped by particular patterns of inclusion, omission, and disparity. The principal value of a narrative is that its information comes complete with evaluations, explanations, and theories and with selectivities, silences, and slippage that are intrinsic to its representation of reality.⁸

4. Clark Moustakas, *Phenomenological Research Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994), 1.

5. Michael Q. Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002), 342-348.

6. Susan E. Chase, "Narrative Inquiry: Multiple Lenses, Approaches, Voices," in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, eds. N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005), 657.

7. *Ibid.*, 657

8. Kathleen Casey, "The New Narrative Research in Education," *Review of Research in Education* 21 (1995-1996): 234.

The narratives include declarative statements about experience but also provide context about how these experiences are interpreted by the participant through their emphatics, their language, their voice, and their world view.

A component of this research perspective is that the research must recognize the self in the communicative transaction that takes place between interviewer and interviewee.⁹ Thus limitations must be acknowledged concerning the location of self and the narratives recorded and presented. Conversations, conceived in this way, are a co-construction¹⁰:

we speak to our participants and ourselves to fulfill the relational responsibilities of representing our co-constructive experiences. The priority in composing research texts is not, first and foremost, to tell a good story; the priority is to compose research texts in relation with the lives of our participants and ourselves.¹¹

There is the additional issue in narrative research, and indeed all social science research, that “although researchers compose research texts attentive to the experiences of participants and themselves, they cannot know the intimate workings of a participant’s thoughts.”¹² Added to this is a potential cultural distance between a middle class white male academic researcher and participants who were predominately African American, living in poverty, and female. I tried to report the narratives given as faithfully as possible, through a lens admittedly somewhat disconnected from the lived experiences of the participants.

With this caveat the intention of narrative analysis is to suss out “the ways that human beings make meaning through language.”¹³ In this spirit, what is reported relies heavily on the actual words of the participants. It would be remiss here not to point out that one of the intentions of this project is to document the participants’ experiences within their social locations, but also to potentially call into question present educational practices and policies. It was immediately apparent that experience within their given environments dictated, and to some degree limited, what the participants knew and how they interpreted their circumstance. However, there was a distinct notion expressed in many of the narratives that knowledge and education was perceived to be connected to social power. To best report the events revealed in the narratives as related to the participants experiences in schools and at the GEDPF, and in an effort to be faithful to the narratives, as given, dialects were not altered.

Methodological strategies were employed to ensure that the verification process for this study occurred at all stages.¹⁴ All the audiotapes were first reviewed by the principal investigator and later transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriber.¹⁵ After receiving the typed transcriptions, the principal investigator edited each transcript, to ensure the accuracy of audio-to-typed

9. D. Jean Clandinin and Jerry Rosiek, “Mapping a Landscape of Narrative Inquiry: Borderland Spaces and Tensions,” in *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry: Mapping Methodology* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2007).

10. D. Jean Clandinin and M. Shaun Murphy, “Relational Ontological Commitments in Narrative Research,” *Educational Researcher* 38 (2009).

11. *Ibid.*, 600.

12. *Ibid.*, 601.

13. Casey, “The New Narrative,” 212.

14. Irving Seidman, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1998).

15. *Ibid.*

translation, and then made summary notes.¹⁶ The data was then read for themes that were implied by the interview protocol and then arranged by how they were revealed in the transcripts. From this I conducted narrative analysis concerning what the participants said about their experiences and their emotional reactions to these as lived and in retrospect. I tried to pay specific attention to the cultural locations of their experiences and how this provided a larger context concerning their aspirations.

The participants did not review their transcripts.¹⁷ Prior to the interviews all participants were asked to read and sign an Internal Review Board's (IRB) approved consent forms. To protect anonymity, all of the names of people and places have been changed. The shared physical space where the interviews were conducted ranged from the GEDPF, my office or my university library, and two took place at state correctional facilities.

Data Analysis

The project necessitated looking at the intersection of the participants' experiences and their beliefs concerning education. To begin my telling of their stories I wanted to look at their beliefs about the nature of their existence, identity, and the social context in which these beliefs were formed. This included religious beliefs in terms of how they view their social position as a matter and mode of being (and also how religion helps to inform their lives as discussed regarding personal ethical orientations), and class, race, and gender-related consciousness forced upon, and perhaps differently perceived of by, the participants. The urban poor generally live under significantly oppressive external dictates as is evidenced by their inequitable access to health care, legal counsel, safe housing, education, and a host of other physical and emotional privations; the question is what those who find themselves in these circumstances internalize both physically and emotionally concerning the aforementioned nature of their relative power, or lack thereof.¹⁸ Pursuant to the former, most of the participants came from spaces of poverty.¹⁹ Many reported experiencing verbal and physical abuse in the home and community. Several of the female participants left school due to pregnancy and lack of related support; several of the male participants left school because of violent acts or involvement with illegal drugs.²⁰

16. A. Michael Huberman and Matthew B. Miles, "Data Management and Analysis Methods," in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, eds. N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage, 1994); and Patton, *Qualitative Research*,

17. This was largely due to difficulty in contacting them. It was apparent early on that contact numbers were short lived for many of the participants due to the transient nature of their residences. This was confirmed by several statements made in the transcripts.

18. There is a lot of data that supports these assertions concerning the lives of the urban poor a good and brief example of which would be the report by Lisa Dubay and Elena Zarabozo, "How Economic Insecurity in Children Changed Over the Course of the Great Recession," Urban Institute, 2013, <http://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/alfresco/publication-pdfs/412907-How-Economic-Insecurity-in-Children-Changed-Over-the-Course-of-the-Great-Recession-Fact-Sheet.PDF>

19. The effects of poverty on school-based measures like dropout rates and achievement measures is amply laid out in by David C. Berliner in a book chapter entitled "Our Impoverished View of Educational Reform," in *Sociology of Education: A critical Reader*, ed. Alan R. Sadovnik (New York: Routledge, 2011), 513-542. Additional context may be found in Gary Orfield. *Dropouts in America: Confronting the Graduation Rate Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2004).

20. The effect of urban poverty have also been well documented in the works of Jonathan Kozol, e.g., *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America* (New York, Broadway Books, 2006) and *Fire in the Ashes: Twenty-Five Years Among the Poorest Children in America* (New York, Broadway Books, 2006).

Additionally at issue is how these narratives reflect either conformity to what one might expect as resulting from these conditions, or in contradiction by way of resilience and resistance. One might infer that what follows supports what some call a deficit perspective. I would argue that the fact that these individuals attended the GEDPF under their own volition contradicts the former. The narratives that follow speak to a spirit of survival and achievement. Also, the views of teachers and schools could be seen as unfair. I would like to stress that most of these stories reflect students that left school—students for whom school was not a pleasant or meaningful experience.

Identity and its Context

These social dialectics existentially affect the perceptions of these young adults with regard to their beliefs about being (the social and physical location of their existence) and about essence (identity), and related issues of meaning, purpose, and even fate. Concerning the effects of the participants' perceptions of their environs, Sonya, a 25 year old divorced mother of three gave the following description: “a bunch a powder smokers, snorters, crack-heads, shooters, gang-bangers.” This statement was typical of the responses I received when I asked the participants for descriptions of the young people they grew up around. The narratives as a whole represented a confluence of resignation, survival, agency, and at some level, as mentioned before, fate within circumstance. With regard to resignation, several of the participants stated beliefs about the environment from which they came.

Kevin, who was 20 and incarcerated at the time of our meeting, and who had previous gang affiliation gave one of the most incisive comments pursuant to survival. (I interviewed Kevin in a narrow corridor between the Fairwood Correctional Facility's disciplinary segregation unit and the general prison population. He had been in a fight the day before and pursuant to prison policy wore close hauled handcuffs during the interview with a guard posted just on the other side of the door to the ‘disciplinary segregation unit.’) The notion of education and knowledge as empowering was a common thread shared by most of the participants. Kevin saw a paucity of knowledge as possibly fatal (Kevin was convicted of robbery in the first degree): “my people die from the lack of knowledge. I feel that a lot of Black people now especially die from a lack of knowledge.”

Speaking of his upbringing and his resignation to life in the immediacy of his early experiences he stated,

life exists in the moment and consequences are generally not thought of. You really don't plan for the future, everybody just live for the day, it's like you really don't see no future outside of what you're seeing every day. I learned...you're seeing dope...so okay boom! that's your aspiration and that's what you want to be. You not seeing that you can come to prison for this, you not seeing could die from this you not seeing you know what I'm saying the bad consequences, your mother getting hurt, anybody getting hurt around you.

Matthew, 23, was another participant who was incarcerated at the time of our interview. His gang membership was conceived of as a form of support where he suggested they “brought me in as far as like a family.” This theme was furthered when expressing a desire to eventually get married, have a family, and help others through the church. Survival and finding stability was a common theme among the narratives and intermeshed with survival themes were notions of

struggle, a belief among some in a form of meritocracy, and a consistent desire for socioeconomic stability among the female participants. For instance, Catherine, 19, stated, “when you actually look at it, you know, you can’t get to that stage of having a nice house...nice cars and having a nice job until you actually get serious...you really want to have those things just because you have it in your mind don’t mean it’s right there, you have to work for it.” Betty, 27, echoed a similar sentiment: “a lot of people want things that are easy in life which is not going to last long cause it’s so easy instead of doing the hard route and really working for something.” Both Betty and Amanda, 20, expressed a desire for stability with the latter specifically seeking “financial stability and just stability in general” and the former tying it to her ideas about merit: “I just wish that you know in five years that I be at that point where I feel like I achieved a lot in my life. I’m happy and I’m comfortable and like I said I don’t have to worry about things.”

Many, if not most, claimed at least some agency and free will, although it was often delimited by perceptions of circumstance. As example Angel, 19, stated, “I’m a unique individual and I know it...some people see it, some people don’t, [and] I can’t convince anybody that I’m good but I think I am...the thing I like about myself most is I always voice my opinion.” So in some ways, and in the same statement, we have an assertion of uniqueness and a certain amount of resignation that others might not recognize this. Angel also shared a fairly negative opinion of the general nature of life: “cause it’s cruel, the world don’t treat you nice.”

Many of the participants revealed other lenses concerning where they felt they fell in the societal order in terms of economic and political power. This generally took the form of seeing one’s present socioeconomic circumstances as existing within a historical context. Pursuant to this Kevin stated,

You have to go back farther than that you have to go back so many years to the segregation. So they segregate us we always stayed in poor homes more so than White people staying in it. It’s like it never changed like we had that Emancipation Proclamation we’ve been set free but to where you didn’t have no education, you didn’t have nowhere to go, nowhere to eat I’m talking about we didn’t have no clothes, no shoes, no nothing.

Two comments that do not follow the general themes above as directly, but certainly connected to circumstance, came from Catherine and Kevin, respectively. Catherine heartbreakingly spoke of a friend “who had a child well actually she has two, [and] she just turned 18” and has an interesting take on agency with regard to fulfilling her need to be loved. She states, “her reason for having children was the fact that she wanted somebody to love her as much as she loved them so I guess it’s I don’t know if you would call it a selfish thing issue or just basically feeling lonely in the world and they just want somebody to be there.”

The second echoed gendered expectations and assumptions that were intertwined in some of the comments made regarding survival. For instance Kevin stated “almost like people say the hood is almost like a jungle...I’m talking about you have like the dominant males you have like the, you know what I’m saying, pre-dominant, I’ll say females that everybody want.” It can be gleaned from the end of Kevin’s comment that gender hierarchies played a factor in how the participants saw their place in the world. In the case of Kevin it is apparent that men are in competition and that female gain power through the male gaze. Differed gender expectations were revealed in Angel’s narrative. She reported her stepfather’s belief that “the right way of marriage is that the wife stays at home and don’t work, just take care of the babies and the husband go out and work.” She on the other hand countered with, “okay I’m living in the real world and women

do work and take care of the babies and maybe even run a household by themselves, and his thing is all woman need is a man, she needs to sit at home and do nothing and have babies and that's just ludicrous."

Race featured in some of the narratives, usually as a source of conflict or alienation. Jennifer, 20, who at various points in her schooling attended predominantly white county schools and predominantly African American city schools, felt that she experienced discrimination while attending the county schools. She reported that the teachers looked for excuses to mete out discipline or "to put you in special ed." Sonya also had experience in both county and city schools, but had a different take on the import race played in her life. When she transitioned from the former to the latter she said "they used to call me white girl with black skin." This prompted her to adapt her persona to the new circumstances, but it created a tension that still resonates with her. She stated, "I can do it both...I could be just as ghetto as you and be as sophisticated as I want to be it's like I'm still dealing with that in my mind trying to place myself trying to [get] used to always listened to what everybody wanted me to be."

Nancy, 21, who described herself as "biracial [and] proud that I have a lot of nationalities" spoke of her racial identity within the context of attending a school where there was a lot of racial tension. She stated, "It was pretty bad at that time...people didn't really come together I mean I really didn't like that because with so many races going on in my family it was just like God, White people always want to be with the White people, Black people hang with the Black people...I'm like okay Mexicans had their own little group I just don't like to be in an environment like that...it was real uncomfortable for me." As will be discussed later, most of the other participants were aware that there were differences between predominately white schools, but also few had experiences in both settings. What follows describes the participants' experiences and attitudes concerning their own experiences in school and their thoughts about education in general.

Perceptions of School

The responses of the participants fell along four main themes concerning the emotional context of their school-related experiences, although there was some degree of overlap. The first involved looking at their experiences with, and attitudes about, discipline in schools, and their perspectives about disparities among the institutions they attended. This section primarily speaks to perceptions of how disparities exist in education, mostly based on socioeconomic status (SES). The second theme looks at caring, or more specifically their feelings about how school staff viewed them, treated them, and viewed their position as educators. The third theme looks at one of the more intangible aspects of schooling, one that broadens possible responses to communities as another facet affecting success in school. Specifically, the participants spoke of how cultural currents outside of the school itself vied for their interest and attention, and how often schools fail in this competition. The last looks at their experience with the GEDPF and its director.

The Emotional Context: Perceptions of Discipline and Disparities

Many of the participants felt as though they were positioned in an adversarial role with school staff. This was mostly expressed as feelings of persecution and disrespect, and of being prejudged/profiled as disruptive or disrespectful. Dennis, for instance, described a threat of vio-

lence for disciplinary infractions: “all I remember is just you know do your work when you don’t you get sent to the principal’s office if you get in trouble all they want to do is whip [you]”. Other teachers criticized the dialects spoken by their students. Devon, 26, recalled a teacher bringing a student to tears by mocking a student’s speech and saying “I don’t understand Ebonics.”

A minority of the participants held a slightly more sympathetic view of the school staff. Angel, who stated that she grew up in a poor but very protective household, was one of several of the participants who spoke to the problems teachers face with discipline in some city schools: “because they don’t teach I mean they teach, but by the children being so bad and disobedient, they don’t get to teach and if you do learn it’s you’re doing it on your own time, it’s actually you going home reading the material which that’s no help, in that case I don’t need to go to school then.” Thomas, 28, had a similar sentiment. He attended three different high schools, had a gang affiliation, and was eventually expelled for fighting. However, like Angel he expressed frustration with the lack of discipline in the classrooms he experienced, and said “kids who don’t want to be in classroom get them out, who gonna mess up the classroom as far as everybody else.” Sonya, 25, identified herself as very religious and experienced moving schools several times. Concerning the aforementioned lack of discipline, she would have preferred a more authoritarian approach: “[teachers should] be like if y’all move I’m gonna knock y’all out, like look I’m the teacher you the students I already got my education you gotta get yours.”

Amanda was a 20 year old college student whose educational experience was negatively impacted by diabetes, homelessness, and an attempted suicide while in high school. She had experience in both majority white county schools and city schools, shifting from the former to the latter due to a change in family circumstances unspecified. She revealed a perception about urban schools, one that had distinct racial overtones:

I keep making that distinction because it is different it’s very, very, very different to be in a school that is predominately White and one that is predominately Black...my mom was very afraid to put me in a city school knowing that it would be predominately Black because of course you’re not going to get the quality of education that you would get at another school.

Kevin correspondingly saw access to knowledge and power as resting in the dominant culture, and the culture in which he grew up as a hindrance with reference to how it affects the social climate within the school. He stated, “[if] I got a better opportunity for my child to learn something I would have to go to a school with less Black people...I don’t think it’s a racist thing, I think it’s has to do with some of the things associated with Black people coming to school...the environment they grew up in.”

Many of the participants perceived disparities in schools resources depending on district attended. For some this was based on belief, for others from direct experience in different schools systems—the latter participants were particularly revealing about how expectations concerning location are firmly rooted in the perception of the intersection between race and social class as related to educational equality. There was also a perceived disparity in the relative quality of their elementary and secondary educational experiences.

Both Dennis and Devon spoke to differences between the more affluent schools in the surrounding suburbs and the city schools, revolving around resources and population. Dennis, for instance, was keenly aware that there were differences between the education he received and

that of children from an affluent suburb, although he was not able to name these differences specifically. In a clear statement of class consciousness he stated,

in Vista Creek they teach you stuff like on a college level...I would have liked to learn you know stuff that normal people don't know you know like on a higher level, basically what I'm trying to say...[is] I could be more prepared for the future you know cause...I can compare Greengrass [a lower socioeconomic urban public school] to like Vista Creek [a very affluent suburban public school] or something like that.

Devon's perspective and experience was similar to those above in that she included a racial component in discussing the perceived differences between more affluent suburban schools and their urban counterparts:

it's a better education when you move to a White neighborhood, they take more time, they try to make sure you know you do good, they try to make sure you understand what you're learning. I want to say they had better books at Edison, better lunchroom food, everything was just better.

Amanda continued this theme and stated that the teachers in the predominately white county district that she initially attended were "pretty good," and were "more like parents...one teacher actually took me in like keeping me every afternoon after school in order for my mom to work...so I guess I felt like they were more of mother figures and people trying to protect us." By contrast at Elmwood, a city high school, she recalled,

I don't remember learning anything there. [We] never had textbooks...they would just give us like worksheets and it seemed like to me at that time a tactic to just keep us quiet you know and keep us under control not really teaching us anything.

Thomas was also aware that some schools have better facilities and resources than others: "as far as city schools they don't invest enough money in these schools they probably light years behind education wise."

The Emotional Context: Perceptions of Caring

A lot of the criticism centered on the perceived quality of the teachers, specifically as related to their behavior related to what many of the participants viewed as personal needs and their efforts toward effective instruction. Angel had experience with both city schools and ones in a more affluent neighboring county system. Concerning the latter schools, Angel had a similar impression as the one previously reported by Amanda, "the teachers I mean they cared a lot about your education." Monique, 43, had a much different initial upbringing growing up in the country with horses and other animals. She describes her parents as lovable and "God fearing." She also presented the common perspective that the instruction she received in elementary school was good and that in high school this broke down with the teachers failing to explain their expectations. Matthew's story fell along these lines. He was doing well in a trades program in high school and was kicked out for reasons he would not specify. He then moved on to selling drugs, and other criminal activities, which eventually led to a conviction for being an accessory

to an armed robbery. He stated that in elementary school he had “good teachers, good atmosphere you know it was a lot of respect between the teachers and the children,” but by middle school that changed where the environment became more violent and less relevant:

once I got to high school it just wasn’t interesting I mean the teaching...[there were] some good teachers...some that didn’t care...some teachers they just come and don’t do nothing they just tell you to do work...they need some better teachers.

Teachers were often described as inattentive, disengaged, aloof, dismissive, discouraging, or just cruel. Pedagogically they often preferred “direct” methods of instruction rather than engaging the students in processes of inquiry and dialog. Amanda, for instance, felt that the teacher’s attitudes are important and are keenly perceived by students:

Some teachers act like it’s a chore to come to school every day and of course that gives you a bad attitude about school...so when a teacher is there and they act like they want to be there and teaching you is really a passion to them then I think that’s what made me feel that they were good teachers or better teachers...teachers make a difference they really do and they affect you...you don’t realize it maybe you know at the time that it’s going on, but I would really just change how the teachers respond to the students and they treat the students.

Perceived teacher apathy was a common theme among many of the narratives. Betty, a 27-year old college student and mother of one, was potentially a student particularly in need of care given that her cousin was killed outside of their high school. She thought that the teachers didn’t try and stated, “we’re not going to try and find out why you can’t focus in class...we’re not going to try and find out why you can’t learn this...time I had teachers in high school that was like [that].” Because of these perceived attitudes, and perhaps also the backgrounds many of the student came from, most students came to hate school. Betty thought

they’re too busy on just trying to get rid of the student you know trying to find out the bad and not really trying to find out how are the kids being treated...kids not want to go to school because they feel like either the teachers are talking down towards them or not paying them any attention.

Joanna, 22, was another former student who likely would have benefitted from some nurturing attention on the part of her teachers. She lost her father young and had a brother in prison. In addition to this she became pregnant her senior year of high school. She left school for both monetary and emotional reasons related to embarrassment and depression.²¹ She stated,

21. According to Federal data from the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, “Alabama was ranked 14 out of 51 (50 states + the District of Columbia) in pregnancies to females aged 15- 19 in 2008,” accessed July 15, 2014, <http://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/adolescent-health-topics/reproductive-health/states/al.html>. Alabama is an abstinence-only state pursuant to the Code of Alabama, “Minimum Contents to be Included in Sex Education Program or Curriculum, Section 16-40A-2, <http://alisondb.legislature.state.al.us/acas/acasloginie.asp>, accessed July 15, 2014.

I had a lot of complications and I had flunked out of a lot of my classes...I was so frustrated seeing my other peers and the people I grew up around in a higher grade than me...that's so embarrassing and I was trying so hard but with me having a child trying to do night school and summer school it was just not happening and for one I didn't have the money...it depressed me for a long time because I knew I was better than that I used to say that I was going to be the one to make something out my life.

She felt that the lack of care was something that directly led to her leaving school and spoke of those circumstances as frustrating and depressing, given that she felt she was always looked at as "the smart one that's going to do something with her life" by her family. Indicative of the position teachers viewed themselves in relative to their students, she stated that teachers would say "please don't raise your hand because we really don't have enough time to take questions." It was apparent that she internalized a perceived lack of interest in her. When asked what would have kept her in schools she replied "better teachers, a better school, a better community, a better...better friends."

Yet another for whom childhood was difficult due to community and family circumstances was Talia. At the time of the interview she was 34 and had five children. She admitted to being raised in a dysfunctional family, and had served time for stealing to provide for her children, but gave few details of these experiences. She also spoke of the advent of crack use in the 1980s and its effects on urban communities. She felt that teacher failed to make the emotional connection:

they knew how to teach, but when it came to dealing with the child they didn't know what to say...they would make me feel sad instead of embracing me and making me feel like I was somebody because they didn't know what I was going through at home, instead of telling me it's okay you know come talk to me and tell me what's going on.

Several participants echoed the perception that some teachers were there simply for remuneration rather than out of any real care or commitment. One such was 21-year-old Christine who stated,

it just seems like they didn't have the passion for it...it just seem like they were doing it just to do it to get a check and I don't see why. If you don't feel like that's what you want to do then switch your profession because if you can't nurture a child then I don't see why you should be in the school system.

Thomas was blunter about his perceived lack of care on the part of teachers. He stated that were "some with good intentions, some with bad you know, they really didn't care about education...some teachers are just there to make a check [and] sit in the classroom, hell you think they the substitute teacher how they teach." The theme concerning remuneration rather than care was also reported by Dennis who laid some responsibility for his resignation on the part of those who he feels should have supported people in his situation. He stated,

we never really thought about the future or what we wanted to be when we grow up you know stuff like that cause like in my neighborhood I can say that teachers were there just for the money you know they never really tried to reached out to us or strive.

He further explains that this affected his motivation: “you know how some people graduate it makes them feel a certain way, I never had that feeling you know as to where I wanted to do something more.”

As an extension of this lack of care many of the participants felt that the teacher were not interested in their backgrounds, but thought this was a key component to being a successful teacher, especially among population that are mostly low SES/at-risk. Concerning this Nancy stated, “there were teachers who don’t want to know you personally or they just want you to do the work and...they weren’t interested in all that trying to conversate and just get to know you.” Thomas was as usual more emphatic: “[you need to] understand the kids there they come from man.” Angel believed that teachers need to understand the emotions of their students and said

I don’t think you can teach somebody if you don’t understand where they’re coming from like you couldn’t tell me too much about the suburbs cause I didn’t come from the suburbs so I mean like you couldn’t tell me nothing about the ghetto cause you don’t know nothing about the ghetto. I think if the teachers were more concerned about the whole well-being of the child and not just the education part, but because if you got something wrong in other areas of course it’s going to affect their education.

Catherine also spoke to the intersection of home life and school, the latter being, and needing to be, a potentially positive place for young people by stating,

it was just somewhere to get away from home...you can come to school and you can be around your friends and you know you really don’t have to worry about the problems at home...basically have an eight hour vacation every time from the problems at home.

The Emotional Context: Competing Interests

What is apparent, to be fair to schools referenced, is that there are many things outside of institutions of education that compete for students’ interest. A possible conclusion one might make is that distractions within the community are a more powerful draw for students’ attention than the schools provide. As discussed in what follows these might include the pursuit of intimate relationships, use of intoxicating substances, dysfunctional family circumstances, and violence. It is also quite possible that teachers do not possess the expectations of these students that might spur them to wholeheartedly try to understand their students’ circumstances and deploy pedagogies that would be relevant to the former. The following narratives concern whether school staff are prepared and willing to make a concerted effort to do an adequate job in piquing and holding students’ interest, both during the instructional periods and before and after school. Obviously this would likely necessitate changes in educational policy and in the allocation resources for extra-instructional activities.

Tanya, 37, was at the time of our conversation married and a mother of a son. She attributed much of her decision to leave school to being “boy crazy.” She also attributes it to a perception, in hindsight, that the school staff was unconcerned about her frequent skipping. She stated, “principal, I just don’t remember anybody coming you know and say *see me so we can talk about what’s going on with you* nothing like that.”

As mentioned before many of the female participants said that they left schools as the result of pregnancy. For Diane, 27, it was the allure of life within the community coupled with a stated ease in skipping school that led to this becoming a reason for her dropping out. She reported “I got pregnant and that came from me skipping school. I wasn’t able to complete the 12th grade. I had to complete a half of a semester in order to graduate and I just didn’t see it fit so I gave up.” Devon had a similar story in that she was on track to graduate, but experienced complications during pregnancy. She stated that this was the primary reason she left school: “It wasn’t because I was a dumb student or because I was having difficulty at school.”

Concerning her perception of her peers attitudes about school Catherine stated, “a lot of ‘em are thinking education is something they really don’t need to get anywhere in this lifetime when actually it’s the opposite.” Talia made a similar point in that she feels that a lot of the people she grew up with “didn’t have nobody at home telling you how important education was.” Is it possible that the people she speaks of were not demonstrated school’s relevance by those that work there?

Some of the reasons given for leaving school represented other distracting factors. Kevin stated that the reason he left may have been due to the allure of other distractions within the community, some which might be hard for a school to compete with. He stated, “so the reason why I didn’t go complete school, it’s just smoking weed, sex.” Thomas was ever terse and made the following statement echoing a familiar theme previously stated that interest in school waned for many of the participants after elementary school. He said, “I felt like school was a waste for me even though I could do some of the school work you know it wasn’t a fact that I was dumb or nothing like that cause in elementary I made A’s and B’s.”

Views of the GEDPF

It should be noted that there was an inherent selection bias in that the participants were GEDPF attendees and were all successful GED completers. However, what is significant are the conditions that were created to make the interactions of the participants with the GEDPF beneficial and what insight they provide concerning meeting the needs of these particular students. The views of the GEDPF were generally given in brief but positive descriptions and in stark contrast to those about the schools attended. What is interesting, on a side note, is that all of the males I quote here referred to the institution and all of the females specifically mentioned Stephen. Regardless, the GEDPF’s environment proved a socially and academically beneficial space. The following narrative excerpts paint a picture of care, discipline, and a willingness to help provide the things that many of the participants were in want or need of.

Kevin thought that the GEDPF was a big opportunity: “everybody was friendly everybody there was concerned about you to help you...it was like the exact opposite of the public schools.” Matthew stated that “it was a good experience I mean everybody that worked there they put a helping hand in,” emphasizing a common theme that the instruction at the GEDPF was much more hands-on and individualized. William, 19, was loath to give specifics about his life experiences, but did admit to having a problem with fighting. He stated that “the GEDPF was good due to a lack of distractions.” Thomas thought the experience was “real good man its people... it’s some people up here willing... willing to work with you as far as getting deep into detail and helping you learn.”

Catherine described the GEDPF as student centered and Stephen as encouraging. Concerning the latter she stated that “Stephen applauds you because you’re trying to do something.” Betty described Stephen’s helpfulness and loyalty:

I had like the summer or something and I had no daycare for my little girl and Stephen has helped me find summer camps and help me find ways to get to the places that I need to get to cause at that point in time I had no transportation...he’s not going to turn his back on you.

Angel stated that Stephen would find money to buy students groceries. Nancy highlighted Stephen’s valuing of individual student voice: “Stephen listens to what you have to say.” Joanna thought of Stephen as a father figure. Diane cried when she told me that her experience at the GEDPF was life changing. She described it as “acceptance, understanding, motivation, praise, love...I could say so much more but I just the words just they’re not there...it has been a wonderful experience.” Tanya Described Stephen as “a cheerleader.”

Elizabeth, 28, was from Kenya and attended mostly boarding schools, which she described as strict and competitive. She reported a positive experience at the GEDPF: “my experience was actually good, I liked the people, if I had any questions or whatever they’re really helpful.” Stephen emerges here as someone generally interested in the backgrounds of his students and of someone that constantly wanted to learn. As example Elizabeth describes his interest in learning Swahili: “Stephen was funny he always had something nice to say about you and he really liked to learn Swahili—he knew a few words that didn’t necessarily mean anything.” Regardless of Stephen’s linguistic abilities in Swahili the end lesson seems to be that he tried to make a connection with each and every person who came through the doors of the GEDPF.

The Response of Educators

This paper simply provides further voices describing the myriad reasons why young people in urban areas leave school. It adds to the important research already conducted, from Fine’s seminal work *Framing Dropouts*²², to more recent contributions from Tilleczek²³ and Rumberger.²⁴ The debate concerning primary causes continues. However, I am most concerned with, and what this research hopefully points to is what can be gleaned by educators concerning their, perhaps limited, but nonetheless important part in creating environments that are relevant and beneficial to the emotional and intellectual growth of their students. One of the things that I most like about qualitative research is that it is localized and interpretative. That said I think the real strength of most narratives is what is communicated in terms of the individual’s lived experiences and how that becomes a site of reflection for others.

What is obvious from what precedes is that the participants in the study were certainly aware of the context of their upbringing, aware of social class distinctions in society and its educational institutions, and aware of lingering racial tensions and related disparities. They also hold

22. Michelle Fine. *Framing Dropouts: Notes on the Politics of an Urban Public High School* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991).

23. Kate C. Tilleczek. *Why Do Students Drop Out of High School?: Narrative Studies and Social Critiques* (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen Press, 2008).

24. Russell W. Rumberger. *Dropping Out: Why Students Drop Out of High School and What Can Be Done About it* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

memories of their school experiences that speak to a profound emotional divide between what schools claim as their mission and how they are perceived by their primary constituents. From a phenomenological stance the fact that it is possible that these teachers and administrators were misunderstood, or that they were not guilty of the claims of the participants, is not the point. To paraphrase Merleau-Ponty,²⁵ perceptions are prime, and those in question are largely unambiguous. Again the probative question for us today is what could be altered in teacher education or in educational policy that might lead to a more favorable view?

Simply put, this paper contends that probably the most important impetus behind student engagement and learning, emotional understanding, and connection is widely ignored in teacher education in favor of narrowly defined training in “classroom management.” The result, as voiced by the participants in this project, is a demonstrable difference in the attitudes these young adults had about their K-12 teachers, and that environment, and those concerning their experience with the instructional staff at the GEDPF. The paper further contends the teacher education, more completely developed, should move beyond limited behavioral expectations to include emotional and cultural understanding in an effort to make the aforementioned intangibles more easily apprehended and accommodated. What this leaves us with concerns the context in which teachers might embrace and learn about students’ lived experiences, and beliefs about schooling, and encourage those students to engage in a personal and communal learning process, to a large extent on their own terms. This allows us to move from a deficit model to one that allows for and draws strength from what the students bring with them into the classroom. What I hope is that pre and in-service teachers will listen to the voices like the ones presented here and elsewhere and use them as a heuristic to earnestly and sincerely attempt to apprehend each of their student’s identities, aspirations, and experiences. The question for us today is how does each of these narratives speak to something that should be addressed in teacher education, pedagogical practice, or in educational policy?

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